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SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL LABOR SECRETARY PROVIDES CHILD LABOR STATUS
REPORT

REF: CALCUTTA 0462

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On December 1, Government of West Bengal (GOWB) Labor Secretary Subesh Das met with Poloffs to discuss child labor and the state government's efforts to implement the national child labor ban enacted on October 10. Das recognized that implementation has been slow, but argued that enforcement alone would only compound the problem as many child laborers provide crucial financial support to their families. Das said that the GOWB is focused on yet-to-be-undertaken surveys to identify different socioeconomic categories of child laborers and provide an appropriate alternative for each. Based on Das' comments, the GOWB appears to lack the resources and drive to tackle child labor head on. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On December 1, West Bengal Labor Secretary Subesh Das met with Poloffs and provided an overview of the state government's efforts to combat child labor. Das denied press reports that children were among those killed during a fire at a Kolkata factory on November 22, but he admitted that implementation of the October 10 law banning the employment of children under 14 in certain hazardous industries had been proceeding slowly. He said enforcement of the law alone, without providing alternative sources of income for child laborers and their families, would only exacerbate the problem. He argued that there are different categories of child laborers and each category warrants a different socioeconomic response. In cases involving children from households where parents are sick and unable to work, Das felt the solution was for the government to provide financial assistance to the child's family. In cases involving children from families where the parents are under-employed and do not earn enough money to meet their basic needs, the government needs to provide better jobs to the parents. Finally, in cases involving children from homes where they are neglected by their parents, the government needs to send these children to safe, group homes. Currently 700 to 800 children are sent to homes each month, but the government does not have the capacity to accommodate every qualifying child, and NGOs need to cover the gap. Das said West Bengal is trying to conduct a survey to identify the number of child laborers in each category (reftel). He wants NGOs such as UNICEF to lead the survey so it remains objective.

13. (SBU) On enforcement, Das said that the government ensures there is no child labor in registered factories, but the problem is that many factories operate illegally and are not registered with the government. Moreover, offenders may face up to six months imprisonment and a 20,000 rupee fine, but the judicial process often takes more than two years. (Note: 1 dollar = approximately 45 rupees. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) Das said most child laborers in West Bengal work in agriculture in rural areas. Of West Bengal's approximately 800,000 child laborers, only 30,000 to 40,000 work in Kolkata. Many child labors are migrating from the poorer neighboring states of Jharkhand and Bihar, as well as from Bangladesh. When asked about government efforts to stop child labor at the source, Das said that the government is planning programs to sensitize local politicians, target particular districts of concern, and alert panchayat (village council) members and employment agencies to the problem.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Two months after the enactment of the latest child labor law, the GOWB has yet to take concrete steps to tackle the problem. The GOWB's focus on providing alternative incomes and homes for child laborers and their families is a positive sign, but it will require improved coordination with the NGO community and given cultural attitudes and the lack of state and NGO resources, an effective response is unlikely.

JARDINE